



Federal study cites fewer homeless

By **Wendy Koch**, USA TODAY – November 7, 2007

WASHINGTON — The federal government plans to release a report Wednesday that shows a national decline in the number of chronically homeless adults who live on the streets or in emergency shelters.

The number fell 12% to 155,623 in January 2006 from 175,914 in January 2005, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The report is based on data — taken on a single day — from 3,900 cities and counties.

Before 2005, HUD did not annually compile such information.

"These numbers show remarkable progress is being made," says HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson, adding much more work remains to be done. He attributes the decline to better reporting as well as greater local and federal resources that provide permanent housing along with health care and other services.

"These are the numbers we've been waiting for for a quarter of a century," says Philip Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which coordinates federal efforts. He says the findings might "re-moralize" a country that had almost given up on the long-term homeless.

Mangano says the decline is consistent with the recent progress being reported by dozens of cities that have developed 10-year plans to end homelessness.

"It's not terribly surprising. It's an aggregation of what's been trickling out" from the cities, says Dennis Culhane, a leading researcher on homelessness at the University of Pennsylvania. He adds, though: "It's a proud moment."

The federal government considers single adults "chronically" homeless if they have a disabling condition such as substance abuse and if they have been living continuously on the streets or in emergency shelters for at least a year.

Culhane says the chronically homeless represent only 10% of people who experience homelessness at some time during the year, but they use 50% of emergency-shelter resources. He says 80% are men and nearly half are African-Americans.

Culhane credits federal funding and other efforts with motivating mayors to tackle the issue.

"We're not helping everybody," says Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. He says increases in federal funding for homelessness are a "drop in the bucket" and do not offset cuts in entitlement programs that he says have exacerbated the problem.

Stoops says he's "very skeptical" of HUD's numbers, adding that it's "almost impossible" to count homeless people. He says people who work with the homeless do not see an overall decline. He says he wonders whether some homeless people are no longer being counted because they've been pushed out of downtowns into neighborhoods that do not provide as many services or track the issue as closely.

"This is not just shuffling people," says Mangano. "This isn't anecdote or conjecture." He cites HUD figures that show nearly 60,000 new permanent beds have been made available for the homeless since 2001.

Mary Cunningham, who spearheads research at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, agrees there has been a big push in the past five years to address chronic homelessness. She cites a shift from emergency shelters to permanent housing that also provides mental health and social services.

Cunningham says HUD's new report, however, has limitations partly because it focuses on a single day. She says it is also difficult to assess whether someone living on the streets has a disabling condition. Cunningham says she has seen declines in chronic homelessness in some cities but increases in others.